THEOLOGY IN ITS RELATION TO PROGRESSIVE KNOWLEDGE:

An Address

AT THE

OPENING OF THE SESSION 1865-6

OF

MANCHESTER NEW COLLEGE,

LONDON,

OCTOBER THE 9TH, 1865.

BY

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LONDON:

PRINTED BY WHITFIELD, GREEN & SON, 178, STRAND.

1865.

AN ADDRESS.

THE College which resumes its work this day professes to impart a special training for the Christian Ministry: and the Christian Minister is one who, in discipleship to Jesus Christ, aims to guide the reverence, to ennoble the conscience, and sustain the piety, of men. To treat such an office as the object of a particular discipline, not simply for the character and affections, but for the intellect too, takes for granted, what has not always been admitted, that Theology is, in some sense, a Science and admits of being methodically taught. This assumption would be false, if religious truth were simply a natural intuition, or a supernatural inspiration, in each individual mind. Just as Aristotle, in order to save Ethics for scientific treatment, dismisses the hypotheses that virtue is either a native faculty or a given feeling, and insists that it is a formed quality and developed order of preferences in the mind;* so, if our "schools of the prophets" are to have any justification, we must be prepared to shew, that religion contains matter for teaching, and is neither inborn like eyesight, nor an arbitrary visitant like a trance or dream: for, in the one case, training would be superfluous, and, in the other, impossible. All teaching is communication from mind to mind: it implies that one mind may know more than another, and the same mind more at a later time than at an earlier. And, using the inequality as instrument for the progress, it further assumes that teacher and taught, instead of being abandoned to lonely inspiration,—"words that cannot be uttered,"—have a common medium of thought and mutual intelligence, and

* Eth. Nic. II. v.

can meet, when they speak together, upon the same real objects. As every Medical school takes for granted, by its very existence, that the animal body is real, and its physiological constitution permanent and cognizable; as every Law school takes for granted that human society is constant, and throws its self-regulating forces into a machinery but little variable; so does a Theological school assume that God and his relations to man are objective realities, perpetually there and approachable by human faculties. Two things therefore, with regard to the nature of religion, are denied by every such institution as this: (1) it is not a mere natural instinct; (2) it is not a mere supernatural grace. And two things about it are affirmed: (1) it presents something real and permanent for the intellect to hold by; (2) it has its undetermined and progressive lines, on which it is the business of the teacher to move and mark the fixed points as they emerge.

Without this mixed composition, of the constant and the variable, it may be doubted whether, intellectually, religion would retain its interest at all. Were it nothing but a scheme of shifting conceptions, unrelated to anything beyond our personality,—the mere shadow of ourselves flung on the universe without,—it might remain, like any other illusion, a curious object of psychological analysis, but would lose all serious place in human life. Were it, on the other hand, a scheme of absolute knowledge, so determined and rounded off as to be, like its Object, "without variableness or shadow of a turning," it might no doubt be recited afresh to each generation, like the alphabet or the numeration table, and so far be made the business of a school: but however new to the learner, it would be old to the teacher, and become wearisome as a routine, unquickened by the real life of his mind. So repugnant is this to both the intellectual and the spiritual nature, that no effort can render it possible for long. Thought is alive, and cannot rotate like a machine; and, in its eagerness for movement, carries every science with it, if not into advance, into aberration,—at any rate into change. Still more are reverence and affection alive; and, while faithful to the same object, they are unable to rest without transporting it into a new air and investing it with fresh lights: so that a religion forbidden to improve betakes itself to degeneracy,

rather than become petrified, and, instead of growing upwards into statelier proportions, breaks into lateral deformities, as the only vent for its vitality. What, for instance, are all the outrages on sense and history committed by the prophetic or allegorical interpreter, but an attempt to adjust a fixed text to a moving world, to find room within the narrow frame of the ancient letter for the grand lines and various groups of the modern picture? These cannot be left out of the scheme of faith, since they have found their way into the scheme of things: and those who seek for God, not in his own universe, but in a document about it, are obliged to stretch and distort the record to make room for what is not there. Even in the most stationary theologies, the real interest lies in the expansion of old truth to embrace and consecrate the newest births of time.

The mode, however, of dividing the constant from the variable elements in a religion is not always the same; and in the intellectual training of Christian teachers, it makes the greatest difference which of two principles we adopt as our rule.

The first assumes that the things to be taught are a determinate stock of truths given in perpetuity, susceptible of no increase, secured against all abatement. These are the divine *constants;* filling the whole sphere of religion; and throwing out all the variables into the secular sciences and arts; amid which religion is to find its application without any reaction upon its theory. Let us consider what direction is naturally impressed upon theological education by this assumption.

The primary aim will be to teach methodically the fixed scheme of positive religion, and secure on every side its hold on the student's mind. Nor is it by any means a scanty intellectual culture that may subserve this end. For the Protestant (to whom we must limit our view) the scheme is embodied in Scripture. Now to be master of Scripture is to be at home in two languages, most unlike each other, and long silent upon the earth; to have an eye and ear for their dialectic variations in time and place; to trace the literary life of the Hebrew people from its dawn to its decline, and of Christendom in its obscure beginnings; to be familiar with the history of the Eastern world till it became a province of the West. These resources

are needed for entering into the interior of Scripture. But no ancient book is rightly appreciated, unless its external history is surveyed, and the witnesses examined to its origin, its travels, its transmission, the uncertainties of its text, and worth of its translations:—researches, the extent and complexity of which are sufficiently attested by the immense critical apparatus they have placed at our disposal. From the moment when the Scriptures were snatched from sacerdotal keeping and delivered over, as the new-found oracles of God, to the venerating scrutiny of reading men, the development of sacred learning was large and rapid; and, though for a time suspended by the excitement and desolation of religious wars, still shewed, in Limborch and Le Clerc, how little the intellectual impulse given by Calvin and Beza had spent its force. The refinement and security which modern scholarship has gradually attained, and the compendious form into which the results of vast research are now reduced, are unfavourable to the reputation of those earlier masters of sacred criticism: the light handbook gives us what we want at a glance, and their heavy folios are left to gather the dust upon our shelves. But whoever has occasion to consult them will be disposed to wonder at the vast strides of approach already made towards the standard of learning in our own day; especially when he remembers to how great an extent the scholar of the sixteenth and even the seventeenth century had to be his own lexicographer and grammarian, to make his own index and concordance, to work out his own archæology, to construct his own maps and tables of dates, and go to the sources of history for himself. These disadvantages, which would excuse a much greater inaccuracy than we actually find, drove the man of learning out over an immense field, and gave him a range of erudition and a grasp of judgment which may well astonish the more special students of later times.

The proportions in which the religious and the simply intellectual impulse contributed to the great works of Protestant erudition, it is impossible to determine. Were it not that, at the revival of learning, precisely similar phenomena appeared on the field of secular literature, and Joseph Scaliger and Henry Stephens rivalled the greatest prodigies of theological industry, we might be tempted to

say that nothing short of an overpowering reverence for the Bible as the word of God, could sustain the laborious patience of the old divines, or invest with any living interest their verbal criticisms and technical disputes. Perhaps the spell put upon the imagination in the two cases, by the undiscovered wisdom and beauty of Pagan literature, and by the spiritual depth of the sacred books, was not so dissimilar as we might suppose, and would stir the mind to the same efforts, and produce analogous results. But, when the first flush of wondering impulse had passed away, secular and sacred learning were doomed, by a single cause, to take different directions, and acquire a character ever more distinct. The Scriptures were assumed to be a continuous oracle, an unbroken authoritative record, homogeneous for all the purposes of religious guidance, a divine book in which the ever-living Author, wielding the human secretaries as his organs of communication, discloses all that is known of his will and moral government. If a critic were to treat the Iliad of Homer, the Cyropædeia of Xenophon, and the history of Thucydides, as belonging to one another, and all as components of the philosophy of Aristotle, the results could scarcely be more fatally grotesque. No doubt, the sanctity attributed to every line secured an eager and prolonged scrutiny of the text, word by word: but the gaze was too close, and the imaginary light was too intense, for clear and comprehensive vision. An exaggerated significance was seen in the simplest phrase; narrative was construed into type, and myth mistaken for history; a Hebrew ode was made to yield evangelic dogma; and whether the Elohist or the Jehovist told the story of Creation, whether Job affirmed of God or his friends denied, whether the Preacher taught Epicureanism or the later Isaiah the law of humiliation, whether Matthew presented Christ as miraculously conceived, or Paul as the pre-existing spiritual Adam, or John the evangelist as the Incarnate Logos,—it was all alike authoritative:—the various elements fused into one uniform alloy, and re-issued, as shekels of gold, to serve for coin of the temple. In the presence of such preconceptions, it is evident that all historical method, all recognition of natural growth of religious ideas, all critical appreciation of contrasted doctrines, all discharge of local and personal errors from the imperishable

essence of divine truth, must remain impossible: and scholarship, kindled at first, but dizzied at last, with the monotonous glory it sees upon the page, settles into blindness and distinguishes nothing. There is an immense accumulation of theological erudition; but, under this spell, it lies dead and dark, and yields none of the brilliant results of the corresponding secular learning. There is not within it the free, sincere and healthy movement on which elsewhere the veracious instinct of the intellect insists; it is held in hand and marched about, as if to check an enemy. Are there weak places exposed and threatened? its masses are ordered up to close and hide them. Can an impression be made of reserved strength? its ranks are opened to shew it and scare assault away. This is not the spirit of the true scholar; who, knowing no enemy, can leave unguarded any holy places already held, and go forth, as pilgrim and explorer, to find new ones that shall enlarge his homage and consecrate fresh points upon the world.

Not even the most rigid theologian, however, can live exclusively with what he regards as the *constants* of religion. Fix these as he may, he finds himself in a changing scene, with the *variables* of which he is in immediate contact; and the relations between the immutable data of his creed and the shifting conditions of human life have to be re-adjusted, as new ideas and wants arise. To qualify himself for this, and become a proficient in *applied religion*, he must know how the world is going on, follow in the track of the advancing sciences, listen to the tones of the younger literature, and breathe the air of other men's thought. He cannot act as trustee of the deposit committed to him, unless he looks around him and sees how it is to be administered in the altered temper of the generations as they rise; what doubts it has to meet, what repugnance to encounter; by what fresh paths of approach it must reach minds now transported into uncalculated latitudes. Theological education, therefore, however severely conservative, is far from deserving the reproach of indifference to the march of the phenomenal sciences. Its own purpose can never be fulfilled without a comprehensive knowledge, revised and filled in from time to time, of whatever the historical critic, and the inductive philosopher, and the speculative thinker, may profess to have achieved. But, under such an inflexible system, the

student's specialty is this; through his wide range he sees nothing in its simply natural light, judges nothing by its own proper evidence, but carries with him a criterion foreign to the field; his stock of *constants* he uses as *regulative*, determining without appeal what shall be taken and what be left; all that falls in with them he appropriates and works in to modernize his creed; all that conflicts with them he discards and blackens as profane. By thus importing the postulates of a divinity-school as the measure of inductive truth, a hopeless breach is created between the logic of theology and that of science, and a war begun which is the more miserable, because the parties to it, always within reach of irritating challenge, move upon different lines and can never fairly meet. It is needless to say how this method spoils everything it touches, scholarship, natural knowledge, religion, and produces the temper most alien to the genius of them all. Is it not a melancholy fact that every modern science has had to make good its footing, not only against sluggish incredulity and prejudice, but against misguided piety? that the very Sun could not find his right place in the heavens, or Man prove, by bits of pottery and flint, his long tenancy of this earth, without a clamour of devout fear and futile contradiction? Is it right that we should always know beforehand, irrespective of the evidence, what reception every physical or ethnological theory which makes large demands on time, every critical verdict which lowers the date or re-names the author of a Hebrew book, will meet with from the clergy? There must be something wrong in a system which disturbs the quiet of eternal truth by dissolving in it a fermenting mass of decaying opinion; and whoever can precipitate the precarious foreign admixtures, and leave the fountains of faith pure and clear, brings the truest healing to the moral and spiritual life of men.

In order to provide for this function, and escape the evils just described, the College for which I speak to-day follows a different rule in drawing its line between the constants and the variables in religion. The principle is this: the things *about which we teach* are given in perpetuity; but the things *to be taught about them* are open to revision in every age. God, in his relations to the universe and to ourselves; Man, his individual and social nature, his responsible position, his history, his destination,—are the ultimate

objects which we here aspire to know; and, as media of this knowledge, on the philosophical side, the intellectual, ethical and spiritual phenomena of the mind; and, on the historical, the manifestations of Divine Life in the past of our humanity, and primarily in the person and work of Jesus Christ, with whom it culminates, and from whom dates a new birth of inextinguishable faith and aspiration, a new glow, unexhausted yet, of pity and of hope. The form and spirit of an intellectual training conducted on this principle it is not difficult to trace.

It is sometimes supposed, that where so much is left open to revision, the continuity of belief must be broken, and no permanent roots be struck to feed the growth and mature the fruits of religious character. Each teacher, it is imagined, relying on his lonely fancies, and dignifying them with the name of intuitions, will begin his quest *de novo,* and think out his scheme of doctrine, as if he were floating by himself in space; owning no authority, and deriving no strength from his partnership in the heritage of humanity. Nothing can be more erroneous. No doubt it must always rest with the individual reason and conscience to pronounce the personal verdict of true or false; but the pleadings on which they decide are fetched from the gathered stores of Christian and heathen wisdom, and epitomize the thought expended on the oldest and deepest problems; and, when seeming to flow immediately from a single mind, are rendered possible there only by a traceless myriad of influences infiltrating into it from earlier time. The whole Past must rain upon the uplands, and the clouds hang on the invisible peaks, of history, to make the smallest rill of thought that winds through our own day. Even in the philosophical treatment of natural Ethics and Religion, where, as in all deductive reasoning, we seem to be independent of what predecessors have found, and to draw conclusions that would be at home in any age, the appearance is illusory; for that very human nature from whose phenomena we reason and whose affections we interpret, has expanded into new and richer forms, and presents, in its circle of Christian experience, data unknown before. And in historical theology, the very semblance of any breach with the past is simply impossible. No man can extemporize, or spin out of himself, a critical knowledge of ancient languages, literature and

life; he is here absolutely dependent on forerunners for his whole outfit of original assumptions and beliefs, and must start on his own explorings from the point at which they have deposited him. The slow and gentle way in which alone the shadows can ever break from off the ancient world, and a little light steal in, now from the pages of a recovered book, now through the propylæum of a dug-up temple, and then from some happy flash of philological combination, sufficiently secures us, so long as we are simple and trustful, without fear and without guile, from any but silent and insensible changes of historical conviction. In such matters, the shocks all come from our insincerities and delays on the one hand, and from the reaction of irreverent extravagance provoked upon the other; feverish paroxysms being the inevitable retribution of long reticence and suppression.

In order to fall in with the peaceful course of theological change, to hold by what is undisturbed, and detach it from the doom of the rest, the student must be well brought up to the point already reached, the point at which he pitches his tent and raises his altar, till he is ordered to move on. This involves the whole apparatus of knowledge required, in the former case, by the stationary defender of the faith; together with an important addition, viz. an acquaintance with the *history* of theology, in the largest sense; not only with the ecclesiastical stages by which accepted dogma was formed, but with the inverse critical processes by which it has been partially dissolved, and removed from the faith of scholarly men. One who is pledged to hold a compacted scheme of belief as divine, can never recognize it as growing or declining with the changing seasons of our nature, at one time the creation, at another the victim, of human reason. He is obliged, therefore, to ignore its history, however indisputable it may be; to treat as an image fallen from heaven, some idol of doctrine which, if you are familiar with its first age, you may see gradually moulded under the pressure of the time; and to insist that it still stands as adamant, though in the dry intellectual air all its tenacity is gone, and observers wonder when the clay is to crumble into dust. Even within the memory of our own generation, how many are the determinate points of change, which it would be simply stupid not to register as past events in the

history of opinion! What has become of the date which stood in our school-tables, "Creation of the World, B.C. 4004"? and what of the next, "The Universal Deluge, B.C. 2348"? Into what undreamt-of distance has Egyptian chronology retreated! yet how many such steps must we repeat, ere we alight upon the first vestiges of man! and how many more, to exhaust the relics of life and death upon this world! We have learned to recognize the composite structure and comparatively low date of the Pentateuch; the progression of religious doctrine through the Old Testament; its variety in the New; the mixture of unhistorical elements in both, and of human opinions long ago corrected, and expectations never fulfilled. In what state of mind would the scholar be who did not know these things? or the reasoner who should suppose that they left all as it was before? All that is *real*, indeed, all that is *Divine*,—God in his perfection, Christ in his filial sanctity, and for humanity the eternal law of Duty and Self-sacrifice,—they and similar changes without end, sweep past and leave more majestic than before. But he only can feel the serenity of this assurance, to whose trust no constants are essential beyond the irremovable realities.

Even he, however, must, from time to time, take careful account of the course of discovery in its bearings on the common heritage of faith, with a view to guide and re-settle the piety of others. For this end, something more is needed than a knowledge of what has already been done, affecting theological belief: he must know what is *still doing*,—the inquiries that are hovering and preparing to alight,—the thoughts that are in the air,—the weather-signs that drift upon the clouds: for these, interpreted by the law of the past, will often give a serviceable presage of the future, and prevent the misplacement of sympathy and effort. If he have the tact of a tender and pious heart, he will use this foresight of the probable direction of thought, not loudly to prejudge what is yet on trial, or to hurt a reverence which time, if it does not entirely spare, may gently train another way; but to avoid lingering too long upon a precarious spot, and silently to withdraw men's worship to ground for ever sacred. But, beyond this noiseless preparation for changes that may not be far, he will guard his mind against any interest of religious partizanship in the pending problems

of science or criticism. Removed alike from boastful elation at their progress and from blind repugnance to it, he will give his religion no regulative power over his scientific judgment: so that, from the tone of his devotion and the cast of his affections, you shall not be able to tell beforehand what he thinks of the origin of species, or the antiquity of man, or the date of Daniel, or the authenticity of the fourth Gospel; but he will surrender himself simply to the facts as they appear in evidence; frankly going with every conclusion fairly won; pausing in every suspense; resting on what is undisturbed; deeming it the office at once of reason and of faith, not to bespeak the universe that ought to be, but humbly to accept the universe that is, and find room in it for reverence and trust.

That this enlargement of the variables in theology, so as to include the whole sphere of phenomenal knowledge, is alone consistent with the true temper of the philosopher and the scholar, will hardly be questioned. But how will it affect our religion? Does it not put Revelation at hazard? Is piety safe, when so much to which it clings is set afloat?

I reply, our rule sets nothing afloat, but only provides how we shall demean ourselves towards that which, by the decree of nature and of God, *is afloat:* and the rule is simply, not to deal with it, whilst it is in motion, as if it were fixed. Certainty is not ours to create or to annihilate; we cannot make it, by pretending it; we do not destroy it, by letting its absence speak for itself. If piety has been brought, as is too probable, to cling to many doubtful and perishable things, so far it is assuredly unsafe: but will you remedy this by declaring the doubtful to be sure, and the perishable immortal? or, by giving the affection its true Object, and carrying it to an eternal rest? If Christendom, sickly and feeble with its long disease of dogma, has got to put its trust, not so much in the living God and his own real ways, as in certain opinions about him and reports of his acts, it is a healing process to disengage its soul from the detaining veil of human notions and propositions, and deliver it straight into personal divine relations. An unreserved repose upon reality, an acceptance of it as better than any semblance and having absolute right over our ideas, is the genuine piety of the intellect, without which there is no sacredness in its exercise, no struggling refractions, no tender tints of trust and sacrifice, to mellow its dry light.

All "Revelation," by the very force of the term, must be a disclosure of *things as they are*. Every corrected conception of things as they are, sustained by scientific evidence, either concurs with the presumed revelation, or it does not. If it does not, a human error is eliminated from an aggregate which we had charged entirely on God, and what is his own stands purified: the natural has gained a light, and the supernatural has lost a darkness. If it *does* concur, then what was before known as revealed is now also known as natural: we see for ourselves what had been taken on the testimony of those who knew better; and our apprehension is unspeakably cleared and deepened. The truth no longer hangs detached, plainly seen indeed, but apart from its tissue of relations; it has found its footing and settled upon its own ground. Revealed religion, so far as it is not fancied but real, must always be undergoing this conversion into natural: if it gives us the master-thought of God, the true key to which the unopened recesses of the inner and the outer world will yield, it can hardly fail to find, or by developing to add, the experiences which conform to it and evidence it. Whatever, being found in Scripture, is re-found in nature and in life, becomes an independent possession of humanity; and, except that the *history* of truth is only second in importance to truth itself, the very Scriptures might so far suffer again their medieval disappearance, without loss of the treasure they had given to the world.

And, if the theologians could but look with a calm eye upon the past, they must see that, wherever the strife is over and the field is still, every advance of knowledge has been a gain to religion, won at the expense only of deforming fictions. As our petty schemes of the world break in pieces and fall away, diviner ones construct themselves and make us ashamed of our regrets. Who would now, in the interests of piety, wish to have back the childish little kosmos of the Hebrew legends, or the three stories of the Pauline heaven? or dare to say, that, in superseding them, Copernicus and Newton blasphemed? Who would choose to have no kosmos at all till six thousand years ago, or fling a stone at a Herschel or a Lyell for letting in light and shewing life within that dark immensity? The age of the world, as it deepens, does but prolong its testimony to God, and make it worthier of his eternity: its scale, as it expands, does but place us in a temple more august, and nearer to his Infinity. Does

any one, whose mind has been enlarged by ancient history and whose heart has listened to the old mythologies, want to have his sympathies reduced again to the "chosen people," and the divine communion with our race, so various and pathetic in its early struggling tones, restricted to that only channel? And if from the person of Jesus Christ the artificial dress of Messianic investiture, and some disguising shreds of Jewish fable, drop away, who that can fix an appreciating eye on the emerging form, will not say that it is diviner far, embodying in its grand and touching lineaments the essence and spirit of a new life of God in our humanity? This experience, this removal to a higher point of faith, is from the first the invariable result with the scholar who works most freely, because quite trustfully, at these problems: as, after long delay, it comes to be the result with all at last. The intermediate disturbance of religious calm,—the pious dismay on the one hand, the petulant irreverence on the other,—befall chiefly those who do not intimately commune with such researches, but, looking on, judge them by external and inapplicable standards, and not by their inner and essential relations. Whoever, in these things, has gone deep and touched ground, is not afraid of falling into a bottomless abyss: and hence the moral importance of that thoroughness of study which we strive to cultivate here. For, may we not say, the essence of the large and liberal spirit lies in the absence of fear and the promptness of love?

Before quitting this desk it is my pleasant duty to make up our annual register of honours obtained at Midsummer in the classes of University College by students of Manchester New College. In Professor Seeley's Latin classes, three of our students were honourably distinguished; in the Lower Senior, the second certificate being awarded to Mr. Higginson; and in the Junior class, Mr. J. C. Odgers receiving the prize, and Mr. Hulme the third certificate; in the Higher Division of the Senior, Mr. Jones and Mr. Higginson both receiving seventh certificates: whilst, in the Lower Junior, the fourth certificate was awarded to Mr. J. C. Odgers, and the seventh to Mr. Hulme. In Professor De Morgan's mathematical classes, three of the same names occur again; Mr. Higginson, in the Lower Senior, taking the fifth certificate; Mr. Jones, in the Higher Junior, taking the fifth; and in the Lower Junior, Mr. Odgers, the second;

completing his honours in Professor Masson's English class, where he received the first certificate. Associates on the same roll, it is pleasant to see the names of Lee, Lamport, Paget and Williams; a partnership at once gratifying to the friendships of the class-room, and marking the parallel and harmonious working of the two institutions combined within these walls. Year by year, as I read or hear this list, I thank God that, when our working-day is over, the provision is secure for service in advance of ours, on both the great fields, of civil and religious life.

Printed by Whitfield, Green & Son, 178, Strand.